



## Tuvan Throat Singing

“Imagine a human bagpipe—a person who could sing a sustained low note while humming an eerie, whistle-like melody. For good measure, toss in a thrumming rhythm similar to that of a jaw harp, but produced vocally—by the same person, at the same time.” —*Newsweek* (March 17, 2006)

**THE TINY REPUBLIC OF TUVA** is a giant when it comes to mastery of the human voice. The ancient tradition of throat singing (*xöömei* in Tuvan) developed among the nomadic herdsman of Central Asia, people who lived in yurts, rode horses, raised yaks, sheep and camels, and had a close spiritual relationship with nature. Passed down through the generations but largely unheard by the outside world, *xöömei* is now the subject of international fascination and has become Tuva’s best known export.



**WHERE IS TUVA?** Tuva (sometimes spelled *Tyva*) sits at the southern edge of Siberia, with Mongolia to its south. Over the centuries, Tuva has been part of Chinese and Mongolian empires, and shares many cultural ties with Mongolia. In 1944 it became part of the USSR, and until the late physicist Richard Feynman drew attention\* to it, was largely unknown to westerners. Tuva is now a member of the Russian Federation.

**A UNIQUE CONCEPT OF SOUND.** The Tuvan way of making music is based on appreciation of complex sounds with multiple layers. The throat singer amplifies some overtones while screening out others, so that a careful listener can hear two, three, even four distinct pitches emanating from one singer’s mouth. The importance of sonic complexity is illustrated by an anecdote about a respected Tuvan musician who was demonstrating the *igil*, a bowed instrument with two strings tuned a fifth apart. When asked to play each string separately, he refused, saying it wouldn’t make any sense. The only meaningful sound was the combination of the two pitches played together.†



**TUVAN THROAT SINGING** includes a variety of styles, each associated with a different sound in nature. In the *sygyt* and *xöömei*‡ styles, the singer starts with a fundamental pitch which then splits into the original tone plus one or more higher overtones that may sound like birdsong or whistling wind. The singer may embellish the highest note by varying the shape of his vocal tract, producing a mini-melody in the top range while the other pitches remain fixed. In the growling *kargyraa* style, the singer produces a deep guttural undertone below the fundamental pitch as well as overtones above. More complex throatsinging styles create rhythms or quickly changing harmonics to imitate the sounds of bubbling water or a trotting horse.



**COWBOYS OF THE EAST.** The rhythms of Tuvan songs often simulate the loping gait of a horse. Tuvans are great admirers of horses, and their songs are as likely to extol the virtues of fast horses as they are to express love for beautiful women. Just as the western cowboy plays a guitar or banjo, the Tuvan cowboy often accompanies himself with a three-stringed *doshpuluur* or *chanzy* (plucked or strummed like a banjo) or a two-stringed *igil* (bowed like a cello). The instruments are traditionally decorated with carved horses’ heads.

\**Tuva or Bust!* by Ralph Leighton (W.W. Norton & Co., 2000) is an entertaining account of Feynman’s interest in Tuva.

†Related by Valentina Suzukei in *Where Rivers and Mountains Sing: Sound, Music, and Nomadism in Tuva and Beyond*, by Theodore Levin with Valentina Suzukei (Indiana University Press, 2006).

‡The Tuvan word *xöömei* is the name of one style as well as a general term for throat singing.